

Red flags and regrets: Banff Writer's Conference
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Joan Baier learned about the conference in an e-mail from a woman she didn't know.

It was early August, and the e-mail was interesting enough for Baier to read it before sending it the way of most such messages -- the trash can.

Written by someone calling herself Elisabeth von Hüllessem, the e-mail described an upcoming literary event, inviting Baier to follow the links to a comprehensive website advertising something called the Banff Writer's Conference.

Baier was impressed with what she saw -- pictures of snow-capped peaks, a hotel that looked like a castle, a tree-lined main street with a jagged mountain looming in the background.

The website promised influential editors and literary agents, other well-known writers, one-on-one consultations and group workshops.

"Enjoy networking, marketing and meeting literary industry professionals and fellow writers in one of the most spectacular national forests and mountains of the world," the literature read.

For a children's book author wanting to move into the world of serious fiction, the conference seemed appealing, so Baier did some more checking. The conference was listed on shawguides.com, a comprehensive and credible online directory of literary events.

It was also mentioned on many other literary websites, listed alongside conferences that have been part of the literary world for decades.

The 72-year-old from Rochester, N.Y., was sold.

"I signed up for it," she says. "She advertised big-time agents and publishers and that attracted me. And most of all, the setting. The image of a castle set amongst the mountains. It was beautiful.

"I thought, 'Gee, I've never been up there, it just looks so beautiful, even if I don't like the conference I would have at least seen the place and perhaps done some writing.' That was definitely a determining factor. It seemed credible.

"Hindsight is 20/20 of course. She did a good job, I'll give her that."

Baier also gave von Hüllessem a cash transfer for more than \$2,500, money she doubts she will ever see again.

It sounds like the plot of a trashy novel, and Baier and others like her are now finding themselves unwitting characters.

The so-called Banff Writer's Conference appears to be fiction, with police investigating what they believe may be an elaborate sham.

Police are still trying to find von Hüllessem, who was living in Banff, but has now disappeared. They have not spoken to her for almost three weeks. She no longer lives at her address, and no longer answers the telephone number listed at the bottom of the writer's conference website. Her answer phone is full.

The Herald too, tried, and failed, to contact her.

While investigating von Hüllessem for possible fraud, Mounties in Banff are still hesitant to call the conference a con. There is still a chance it is simply a case of someone getting into something way over their head.

However, they are looking into whether von Hüllessem and a woman wanted on warrants in the U.S. -- a person known to have 16 aliases and wanted for fraud-related offences -- are one and the same. A well-regarded literary website, Publisher's Lunch, suggests they are.

Mounties are also looking into other events linked to von Hüllessem, namely a charity fundraiser for autism claiming to feature entertainers such as Celine Dion, Elton John, Rod Stewart and Barbra Streisand.

And there is also a second conference planned for Vancouver early next year, also under von Hüllessem's name.

The conferences and the charity event -- both initially scheduled for late October -- have since been canned, the saga leaving a trail of wreckage in its wake.

At least 15 people have so far contacted police in Banff after registering for either the conference or the fundraiser. The list includes top U.S. agents and award-winning authors. Even a major U.S. autism charity signed up, allowing von Hüllessem to use their name in conjunction with her celebrity fundraiser.

They have since stepped away from the Banff event.

Baier herself is out more than \$2,500, money she took from her "rainy day" fund to pay the \$1,700 registration fee, an \$815 non-refundable plane ticket and several bank and credit card fees.

"I am in a big hole," she said. "But it's more than just the money. I'm now questioning all sorts of things. I feel people think I don't have two brains to rub together.

"You feel stupid. I was taken, and I shouldn't have been taken. That hurts."

Baier signed up for the initial writer's conference, planned for last August at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel. She was ready to attend, too, booking a discount flight to Calgary through the Internet.

Just days before she was to leave for Canada, she got an e-mail from von Hüllessem saying the conference had been postponed because of smoke from forest fires near Banff, and would be held instead in late October.

Baier said the excuse seemed valid, and indeed it may well have been -- a pall of smoke hung above the resort town for weeks, the result of massive fires in the Crowsnest Pass and in B.C.

"She said it wasn't fair to bring people here," said Baier. "I had read about the fires in the paper, so I knew it was legitimate."

But Baier couldn't attend the conference in October. She was teaching a writing class in the fall, so she asked for a full refund.

"She was very amenable to that, even asking how much my airfare was and asking me to send my ticket receipt. There was that credibility again," says Baier.

"Then she told me the cheque was going out that day. It didn't come. I called her finally, about 10 days later, and she said the mail to Canada was terrible."

Eventually Baier got her cheque, close to two weeks ago, made out to her, for \$3,323.67.

It bounced.

"It turned out it wasn't enough after factoring in the exchange rate, and then it turned out to be nothing at all," says Baier. "That was a nervous day. Your stomach drops out. Right away you start thinking."

Other people also fell victim to the possible scam.

Michelle Tessler, a New York-based literary agent with Carlisle and Company, agreed to speak at the event after being approached by someone calling themselves von Hüllessem.

Tessler fortunately didn't pay out any money.

"I was scheduled to speak," she told the Herald. "But I have been used as bait. It's too bad."

Jim Donovan, a Dallas-based literary agent, said the writer's conference seemed almost too good to be true. Still, he signed up and was looking forward to speaking in Banff this past August.

"I saw that famous image of the famous castle in the mountains and you know what? It looked good," says Donovan.

"She said she would pay \$1,000 towards my airfare, put me up for four nights at the Banff Springs. I thought it was all of a bit sudden, not even asking for credentials, but I just wanted to do it enough."

Like Baier, Donovan had some questions about the conference. Some things just didn't add up. Still, he registered.

"She didn't really know who else was coming, and that was extremely odd. And she had no promotional brochures or anything, which was strange," he says.

"She said it (the conference) was going to be rescheduled for later, and would coincide with this (autism) charity.

"I thought the whole thing was odd by this time."

Looking back, Baier says there were several "red flags" to which she should have paid attention: a lack of any detailed conference schedule, the fact she couldn't pay with her U.S. credit card, a lack of a full list of attendees and speakers.

"I just trusted enough based on other information to buy in," she says. "It seemed credible."

The affair has hurt Baier more than she is ready to admit.

After finding out about the possible scam, and the police investigation, she began to suffer severe pains in her chest. She thought it was a heart attack and went to hospital.

It turned out to be a serious panic attack. The 72-year-old retiree is still recovering, and says her energy levels are at an "all-time low".

She has been forced to sell stocks to pay off her debts. As far as Baier is concerned, the conference is an elaborate scam.

"I know I wasn't attacked or anything like that, but in a way, I feel like I was. I do feel violated. When I do get my energy levels back, then I know the anger is going to come.

"She'd better watch out. I don't like to be taken."